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Social statistics

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report was prepared at the request of the Statistical Commission at its thirty-ninth session. It includes the conclusions and recommendations of the Expert Group Meeting on the Scope and Content of Social Statistics, held in New York from 9 to 12 September 2008. The Commission may wish to review and adopt the recommendations regarding the production of an exhaustive inventory of: (a) existing international methodological standards and guidelines in each area of social statistics; (b) the availability of social statistics at the global level, including measures of quality; and (c) ongoing statistical and methodological activities in social statistics at the international, regional, subregional and national levels. The Commission may also wish to request that the United Nations Statistics Division report periodically on its progress in implementing the recommendations of the Expert Group.

Points for discussion by the Commission are contained in paragraph 22.

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I. Introduction

1. The activities undertaken by the United Nations Statistics Division in response to the request and decision of the Statistical Commission at its thirty-ninth session (E/2008/24, chap. I.B, decision 39/116, para. (c)) in the area of social statistics are summarized in the present report. The Division organized and held the Expert Group Meeting on the Scope and Content of Social Statistics in New York from 9 to 12 September 2008.

II. Background and objectives of the Expert Group Meeting

2. The Expert Group Meeting was organized by the Social and Housing Statistics Section of the Demographic and Social Statistics Branch of the Division. The meeting was planned as a follow-up activity to the Seminar on New Directions in Social Statistics, held in New York on 22 February 2008[1] on national practices of collecting, processing and disseminating social statistics, and the Expert Group Meeting on Setting the Scope of Social Statistics, held in New York from 6 to 9 May 2003.[2]

3. The meeting was convened to: (a) identify the scope and content of contemporary social statistics in order to establish areas that need to be addressed by an international action plan; (b) provide critical input towards the development of the international action plan by pointing out areas in need of international guidelines and addressing related issues such as coordination among various agencies and institutions at both the national and international levels; and (c) if the need for such an arrangement was clearly identified, discuss the draft terms of reference for a proposed city group or some other organizational arrangement such as a task force or Friends of the Chair.

4. The meeting brought together national, regional and international experts on social statistics. Participants included experts from national statistical offices of 20 countries: Australia, Bulgaria, Canada, Chile, China, Colombia, India, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Jamaica, Jordan, Mexico, Mozambique, Norway, Philippines, Russian Federation, South Africa, Sweden and United States of America; representatives of the Statistical Office of the European Communities (Eurostat) and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development; and representatives from two specialized agencies, the International Labour Office and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. The meeting was chaired by Katherine Wallman of the United States, and the Rapporteur was Mariana Kotzeva of Bulgaria.

[1] See http://unstats.un.org/unsd/statcom/new_directions_seminar.htm.

[2] See http://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic/meetings/egm/default.htm.

III. Recommendations of the Expert Group Meeting[3]

A. General framework for social statistics

5. It is considered an advantage to have a well-developed, coherent and homogenous framework for social statistics that will apply, essentially, a bottom-up approach, starting from specific and well-defined social concerns that are universally pertinent, such as population, family and communities, health, education and training, work, economic resources, housing, crime and justice, and culture and leisure.

6. In essence, such a framework would have for each social concern an accompanying statistical data collection system that includes relevant concepts and definitions, international standards, recommended topics, recommended tabulations, defined periodicity and sources of data. Collected data would also need to be disaggregated by population group (the young, the elderly and women, to name a few) and by geographical level.

7. Ultimately, each component of social statistics should be clearly and unambiguously described in terms of: (a) the social concern it addresses (e.g., health, housing, learning and education); (b) sources of statistics (administrative records, population and housing census, household and other surveys); (c) statistical data collection and its components (the existence and applicability of international standards in terms of the statistical method, definitions and concepts, recommended topics and core questions, recommended tabulations, classifications, periodicity); (d) different population groups (population groups should be defined in terms of age, sex, socio-economic, ethnic and disability status); and (e) geographical level of presentation of statistics. The framework, therefore, may be described as clusters of social statistics unified by common methodologies, addressing the following major social concerns:

(a) Population;

(b) Family and community;

(c) Health;

(d) Education and training;

(e) Work;

(f) Economic resources;

(g) Housing;

(h) Crime and criminal justice;

(i) Culture and leisure.

8. Such a framework together with an inventory of existing international standards and classifications would allow gaps to be identified and addressed in a consistent and strategic manner.

[3] A summary of the Expert Group Meeting as adopted by participants will be issued as an addendum to the present report (E/2009/9/Add.1). The complete report of the meeting will be made available to the Commission as a background document.

9. In addition, there is a need to address issues related to the quality of data and their dimensions, as follows:

(a) The efficient use of resources;

(b) Consistency over time and space and across sources;

(c) Accessibility and affordability;

(d) Comparability through standards;

(e) The potential for disaggregation;

(f) Validity and reliability;

(g) The relevance to policy;

(h) Clarity and transparency;

(i) Interpretability;

(j) Timeliness and punctuality;

(k) Coherence across sources.

10. Indicators, defined as derived values as opposed to data elements (variables), represent a particularly important part of the process of establishing successful social statistics, especially in the phase of data dissemination. Ensuring the availability of timely and reliable indicators significantly increases the relevance of collected statistics, as does the existence of analytic measures.

11. The systems for statistically and systematically measuring and monitoring well-being in several countries illustrate the feasibility of such approaches at the national level. Yet, it must be noted that in developing systems and frameworks, the complexity and applicability of universal concepts, definitions and classifications remain a particular concern; similarly, undertaking the development of a social statistics framework within a national statistical office needs to be assessed from the point of view of how such a development may transform the office itself in terms of staff and organizational profile.

12. Achieving a similar functioning and universal framework at the international level, however, is not considered feasible because there are significant differences in the social constructs and social fabric of contemporary societies. Hence, the approach to developing social statistics is based on a template of clusters of social concerns and statistics, as set out in paragraph 3 of the summary.[3]

B. Coordination of social statistics at the national, regional and international levels

13. In the light of the fragmentation of social statistics and the existence of the many and specific clusters and domains, coordination at all levels of data collection, processing, dissemination and analysis increases in importance. The process of coordination also directly affects the efficiency of all steps related to developing appropriate standards and methods, agreeing on concepts and definitions, identifying core topics and adopting classifications and other components of statistical methodology.

14. Given the wealth of national, regional and international experiences and the variety of approaches in that regard, it would be beneficial to collect, consolidate and organize relevant national, regional and international practices in such a manner as to provide a source of possible solutions to others.

15. Specific benefits in the area of social statistics are realized by effective regional coordination. A number of national statistical authorities benefit from effective regional arrangements that allow them to synchronize their efforts and to take advantage of cooperative activities. There is ample evidence of substantially positive outcomes from regional cooperation.

C. International action plan for social statistics

16. The Expert Group Meeting recommended, as part of an international action plan for social statistics, an immediate and priority activity to produce an exhaustive inventory of:

(a) Existing international methodological standards and guidelines in each area of social statistics;

(b) The availability of social statistics at the global level, including measures of quality;

(c) Ongoing statistical and methodological activities in social statistics at the international, regional, subregional and national levels.

17. This three-pronged inventory is a crucial first step in addressing a number of pressing issues in a coordinated and coherent manner. Understanding the complexity of the assignment, the Expert Group requests the Statistics Division to closely engage and rely on the extensive and comprehensive achievements of international organizations at the global level, such as the International Labour Organization, the World Health Organization, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization and the Organization for Economic Cooperation for Development, to name a few, as well as regional institutions, such as the regional commissions for Africa, Asia and the Pacific, Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean and Western Asia, the Statistical Conference of the Americas and the Conference of European Statisticians and their respective task forces and working groups, and to build on existing work from other networks and the broader statistical community.

18. The existence of the inventory will also allow work by expert groups with specific terms of reference in identifying and assigning core variables for particular clusters of social statistics that would provide significantly enhanced capacity to monitor and quantify social phenomena in a more coherent manner.

19. The inventory will result in identifying gaps in all three of the areas listed in paragraph 16. The resulting follow-up activities could consist of:

(a) Filling some gaps in international standards by developing handbooks and manuals and by establishing training programmes aimed at improving national capacity to collect and process relevant and reliable social statistics;

(b) Initiating data collection in some of the different clusters of social statistics where gaps in the availability of international statistics are identified,

including measures of quality, such as housing, time use, migration, disability and victimization;

(c) Supporting, and if necessary initiating, the work of various institutions in developing instruments to capture social statistics and make them more accessible;

(d) Addressing emerging issues, some of which are:

- Child poverty
- Classification of crimes
- Deprivation
- Economic disadvantage
- Family matrix
- Migration
- Human trafficking
- Quality of education
- Social transfers in kind
- Social exclusion
- Violence against women

20. The Expert Group Meeting endorsed the introduction and maintenance of a website that would reflect the activities mentioned above; it will also have to take advantage of contemporary technology in terms of creating online facilities to exchange opinions, expertise and knowledge among a broad group of statisticians. The experts also recognized the importance of using information and communications technology as part of the social statistics process, rather than considering it solely as a tool.

21. The Expert Group discussed at some length whether the creation of an institutional arrangement to act as a champion for social statistics within the global statistical system or to oversee the activities that would be undertaken as a result of the work recommended above was needed. It concluded that such a proposal would be premature in the light of the significant time and effort needed to create an inventory of existing standards and ongoing activities, identify the gaps and recommend priorities for targeted work by expert groups with specific terms of reference.

IV. Points for discussion

22. **The Statistical Commission may wish to:**

(a) **Review and adopt the recommendations of the Expert Group Meeting on the Scope and Content of Social Statistics in general and those pertaining to the proposed international plan of action in particular;**

(b) **Request the Statistics Division to report periodically on the implementation of those recommendations and other pertinent issues related to social statistics.**